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ABSTRACT

This analysis reviews the data on two types of extended school programs--those that extend the number of hours per day students spend in school, and those that extend the school year. Proponents of extending the school day or the school year frequently cite examples from outside the United States, where the average school year is often longer, and the average school day is also frequently longer. Although the news media focus on extended school time as a remedy for low educational achievement, little evidence exists to support this claim. A study by the Carnegie Corporation has indicated that students spend just under one-third of their time in school, and that they face the greatest risks and opportunities during their discretionary time. Opponents of extended day/year programs recognize the noninstructional reasons that might make longer time in school more attractive, but they also cite the bulk of research suggesting that increased time in school does not lead to greater academic achievement. Opponents of such programs also note the financial problems associated with increased schooling time. Joint programs between schools and community services present an opportunity to deal with the risks that exist for disadvantaged children without radically changing the school hours or calendar. Schools may play a coordinating or facilitating role in engaging students in a variety of after-school activities. Another option educators have considered is year-round schooling, a reorganization of the school year into several instructional blocks, interspersed with shorter and more frequent vacations. Proponents of this type of program emphasize the potential negative impact of summer vacation on student achievement. They see alternative modes of scheduling as a way to remedy inequalities of learning opportunities. The research literature indicates that time is a necessary but insufficient condition for improving achievement. The crucial issue is how time is used, with quality of instruction being the key. (SLD)

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A Digest of Research from the Laboratory for Student Success, No. 212

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Should the school day or school year be extended in efforts to improve student performance? Proponents of extended school time suggest several benefits that might accrue for students and the community if such changes were to take effect. They argue that more time in school might be beneficial for economically disadvantaged children and/or children in this nation's inner cities, who lose some of their academic gains over the summer and are more at risk during non-school hours.

Researchers from the Laboratory for Student Success reviewed the literature on two kinds of programs—those that seek to extend the number of hours per day students spend in school and those that seek to extend the school year. The consensus was that although extending time in school might have non-instructional benefits, there was little evidence that it would elevate the level of student achievement. The extreme expense of such changes is also prohibitive.

ARGUMENTS FOR EXTENDING THE SCHOOL DAY/YEAR

Proponents of extended school day/year programs frequently cite examples from outside the U.S. Many economists, industrial leaders, and politicians have suggested that the school year be extended to 220-240 days as in Japan, China, or parts of Europe. The average school day is shorter in the U.S. than it is in these countries as well, with fewer U.S. students engaging in after-school or extended day activities (National Education Commission on Time and Learning, 1993). Cuts in fiscal programs also mean that many community-sponsored after-school activities are no longer running.

Although the news media tend to focus on extended school time as a remedy for low educational achievement, little evidence exists to support this claim. In the research literature, a study by the Carnegie Corporation involved an analysis of the amount of time students spend in school each day. The research showed that school accounts for only 32% of the students' waking hours and that during their "discretionary time," students face the greatest risks and opportunities. Particularly in impoverished areas, students are more likely to be confronted with such risks as substance abuse, crime, violence, and sexual activity than their more advantaged counterparts (Carnegie Corporation, 1994). Similarly, economically disadvantaged students are shown to lose a substantial amount of what they have learned during the school year over the summer break, although it is unclear whether advantaged students experience loss as well (Cooper, et al., 1996).

RESEARCH EVIDENCE

Opponents of extended day/year programs recognize the non-instructional reasons that might make longer time in school attractive, particularly for urban communities where many disadvantaged students reside; nevertheless, they cite the bulk of research suggesting that increased time in school does not lead to academic gains. For example, in a comprehensive review of 20 years of research literature prepared by Worthen and Zstray (1994), little evidence was found to support the link between time in school and student achievement.

A similar conclusion was reached by Adelman (1996), who emphasized that increased time in school was a weak strategy that might work against other important reform efforts. After finding no clear pattern of improvement for participating schools using an experimental 220-day calendar, Adelman recommended that the experiment be discontinued. She suggested

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that flexible school schedules that encourage varied approaches to curriculum and instruction can be more beneficial.

Opponents of extended day/year schooling also cite financial problems that could result from increased schooling time. Extension of the school day by 1.5 hours would cost about $9,000 per teacher and somewhat less for other staff over the course of the school year. One study indicates that districts could anticipate a 25% increase in routine operating costs to cover salaries, materials, and utilities. These expenditures would be difficult to maintain over time. At the national level, the annual cost of adding 20 days of instruction to the average 180-day school year would be between $20 and $22 billion. Taxpayers might not support a significant increase in the compulsory school year if it would mean added taxes as well.

THE VALUE OF JOINT PROGRAMS

Joint programs between schools and community services present an opportunity to deal with the risks that exist for disadvantaged students without radically changing school hours or the school calendar. The Carnegie Corporation study indicates that a strong support system for youth in school facilities from early morning until evening hours can significantly impact children's success in school and in the future. Their recommendations include:

- Recognize joint opportunities to apply and extend what is learned in schools.
- Expand school operating hours and enable community groups to use school facilities before, during, and after school hours, including weekends and summers.
- Communicate high expectations for students' use of out-of-school time and assist them and their families in making constructive choices.

Schools need to recognize the variety of resources that can provide suitable activities for students in non-school hours, including community youth organizations, cultural organizations, libraries, parks and recreation departments, health agencies, businesses, and institutions of higher education. Schools may not be able to provide services directly, but they can play a coordinating or facilitating role.

ALTERNATIVE CALENDARS

Another option educators have considered is that of year-round schooling. This term refers not to a specific plan but rather to a reorganization of the school year into several instructional blocks, interspersed with shorter, more frequent vacations to make learning more continuous without necessarily increasing the actual number of days students spend in school. Year-round programs are also aimed at increasing the service a building can provide. According to the 1993 report of the National Education Commission on Time and Learning, there are currently 52 different configurations for schedules in year-round programs across the country.

Proponents of this type of program emphasize the potential negative impact of summer vacation on student achievement. They see alternative modes of scheduling as a means to remedy the inequality in learning opportunities and alleviate the differences in achievement that summer vacation creates for children of different economic backgrounds. Additional claims for alternative calendars include the possibility of decreasing student vandalism to school property that occurs over the summer and diminishing teacher burn-out by allowing more scheduled breaks in the school year. This research synthesis did not assess whether such claims are accurate and whether alternative modes of scheduling are actually more effective in improving student achievement than the conventional school calendar.

CONCLUSIONS

Extending the school day or year may bring non-instructional benefits, but little research-based evidence exists to support the possibility that student achievement will increase as well. The research literature indicates that time is a necessary but not sufficient condition for improving achievement. The crucial issue seems to be how the time is used, with quality of instruction being the key.

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